

Leadership Lessons from the Front Lines of Finance

WHEN YOU THINK OF INVESTMENT BANKING AND WEALTH MANAGEMENT PROFESSIONALS, YOU MAY NOT THINK OF THEM AS BEING CRITICAL TO YOUR NETWORK, OR YOUR CAREER. BUT YOU'D BE SURPRISED TO FIND THAT DANA SILASKI AND AMY KNIGHT, BOTH MANAGING DIRECTORS AT STEPHENS, A LEADING FAMILY-OWNED INVESTMENT FIRM, ARE OPEN TO KNOWING YOU AND SUPPORTING YOUR GOALS – WHETHER OR NOT YOU'RE DOING BUSINESS TOGETHER.

We sat down with Silaski, who primarily advises family-owned and private companies, and Knight, a private wealth manager who works with individuals and families, to discuss how financial services have changed for female leaders, evaluating risk, and the importance of diversifying your network. Below are edited excerpts.

You both have been working in finance for well over two decades. As the industry has evolved, what's the biggest change you've seen for women in the field?

Amy: A big difference today is that women are often the family's primary financial decision maker and men and women no longer automatically assume I'm an assistant or secretary. Investors and clients look for and are comfortable with female professionals. I believe women's growing involvement in personal finance reflects a significant shift towards empowerment and self-sufficiency rather than a reliance on their male counterparts. Women tend to live longer, so it's imperative that they be more involved in planning for their financial future.

Dana: On the investment banking side, one of the biggest changes I've seen is the emergence of more women in the broader deal community. While investment banking is still a very male dominated industry, when you look at the M&A [mergers and acquisitions] community more broadly, you have a lot of women in the business, through law firms, accounting firms with transaction advisory and audit partners, and more. You're seeing more diversity within the professional services community and across a broad range of capital providers, whether it's private equity, family office investors, or private debt providers. This is providing women with a much richer, broader network. With our corporate clients, more women are rising to leadership positions. And in family-owned companies, we have seen sons and daughters take the reins, sometimes together, with ownership transitions to the second and third generations.



Dana Silaski
Managing Director,
Stephens Investment
Banking
dsilaski@stephens.com
(501) 377-2448



Amy Knight
Managing Director,
Stephens Private Wealth
Management
aknight@stephens.com
(479) 718-7429

A recent study from Stephens, How Women Can Build Wealth: Rethinking the Role of Networks and Reevaluating Risk, found that female executives often have more risk aversion when it comes to building wealth, which could be inhibiting them. Have you found this mindset among your clients, and if so, how do you help them view risk differently?

Amy: Women tend to be more methodical and want to understand and be educated on available investment options, and they often ask more questions. They typically aren't interested in the latest, hottest stock pick or get-rich-quick investment. It's much more about making sure they can plan for retirement and life events such as college education for children, vacations, weddings, et cetera, and understanding how to maximize tax savings.

I encourage clients to think long term by comparing short-term goals to longer-term goals. Shorter-term goals such as building a savings account should be more conservative in nature than a goal of saving for retirement, which is typically longer term and can afford more risk. I also recommend writing out a plan with specific goals and timeframes and revisiting the plan every six months or at least yearly. Working with a professional is often the easiest and least stressful way to develop and monitor a plan, but even sharing your goals with a friend, relative or spouse is beneficial. Taking charge of your finances is very empowering for women especially when the results of planning and saving can provide the peace of mind needed to explore other options in their career, take a dream vacation, or help a relative with their education.

Dana: I think we have to realize imposter syndrome is a real thing and women generally want to make sure they're absolutely qualified before they speak up or are willing to take on more risk. That's where I've seen risk aversion - not being willing to pursue a career opportunity or a new role. We need to encourage one another to raise your hand, to say yes. Then give yourself time to ask questions, seek advice, build your network and keep learning.

As you've navigated your own career, how has risk played a factor in some of the decisions you've made or maybe didn't make?

Amy: I've seen my female clients are less likely to change careers and change firms and I myself have passed on offers from other firms. I've been recruited by other firms, but it would've never fit for my family, and Stephens is an incredible place to work. The safety and security of being with something I know is where I've been more risk averse.

Dana: It's always a balancing act - my career, my husband's, and our three daughters. When it comes to risk, I've tried to be as intentional as possible about building a personal network for the benefit of my children as I have about building a professional network for the benefit of my career. Networking with moms of daughters who know which ballet class is best or who can help with carpooling is just as important for career women as building relationships of trust with clients.

Speaking of networking, the Stephens report also found that female executives often have smaller networks and fewer financial professionals within those networks. What advice do you have for female leaders about how to diversify and expand their networks?

Dana: Building relationships in your network really comes down to earning trust. At Stephens, it's not about a transaction, but about being a trusted advisor for clients through various stages, as their companies grow and more capital is needed, as the competitive landscape changes, and as owners consider exit alternatives or transitions to the next generation. We think very long term when originating new relationships. We are happy to be a resource for attorneys, CPAs and others who are helping their clients think through important decisions. Constantly interacting with investors and owners, we can offer perspective and ideas. Confidentiality is critical. And it all starts with one thing: trust.

Amy: The first questions men ask each other when they're networking are very different from women. For men, it's, "what do you do?", not who you are, or what activity your child is enrolled in. To call up a few guys to have a drink after work or watch a baseball game is a little awkward, so one of the things I learned to do over the years is to include the other spouse, if that's possible, or mutual friends. A personal outing with two couples or friends creates a different environment and still allows you to network.

What's the one piece of advice you wish you had told your younger self, or what you'd tell younger female leaders today?

Amy: Find mentors, those ahead of you who are trusted colleagues who you can ask questions and who will champion you and include you in projects. And add people to your network with different expertise so that if you don't know the answer to something, you have contacts who can help you find the answer. It's especially important to include men as mentors, as they think differently and interpret situations differently than we do.

Dana: Use technology, but please ask humans for advice. Don't be afraid to ask someone at your school or church, your mom's CPA or your dad's hunting buddy, for a 15-minute conversation if you believe their experience could offer insight on whatever opportunity or goal you are pursuing. If they don't know, they will often connect you with someone who will. You're going to get such richer intel and information from a human than from anything you can ask on the Internet. And the best part? It builds your network.

To learn more about Stephens contact stephensinc@stephens.com. To explore networking opportunities with Dana Silaski and Amy Knight, please find them on LinkedIn.